

Released Guantánamo inmate speaks out

Mamdouh Habib indicts Australian government

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Australian citizen Mamdouh Habib's first media appearance since his release without charge from Guantánamo Bay on January 28 has opened up a can of worms for the Howard government. Habib's testimony, his first opportunity to challenge a protracted campaign of malicious allegations and lies, provides further damning evidence that the Howard government, in alliance with the Bush administration, is guilty of war crimes.

In interviews last Sunday with the *New York Times* and the Nine Network's "Sixty Minutes", Habib described how he was subjected to three-and-a-half years of torture and sadistic physical and psychological abuse while illegally incarcerated under Washington's direction in Pakistan, Egypt and Guantánamo Bay.

While Habib has promised to reveal more in forthcoming legal action against the government, he made clear that Australian officials had witnessed his torture in Pakistan and were present during his subsequent illegal transfer or "extraordinary rendition" by US authorities to Egypt. Rendition is the term used to describe the export of US intelligence services' prisoners to other countries for torture.

Habib told "Sixty Minutes" that after being arrested in Pakistan in October 2001, he was hooded, beaten and subjected to electric torture over several weeks. During these interrogations, which were witnessed on two occasions by an Australian official, he was accused of blowing up the Egyptian consulate in Pakistan. He also explained to the *New York Times* that one American female interrogator told him it was "his last chance" to confess and that an Australian official said, "I'm sorry for you, Mr Habib, you're never going to see your kids anymore."

Habib was taken to a room and hung by his wrists, which were handcuffed to hooks on the wall. The only way he could lift himself up was by standing on a barrel lying sideways on the floor, but the barrel was electrified. He eventually lost consciousness. When he came to, a man jump-kicked him in the face and stomach.

Habib told "Sixty Minutes" that he was later beaten by about 15 American and four Pakistani men at a military airport, stripped naked, administered with an unknown suppository drug and tied up before being flown—hooded, gagged and bound—to an Egyptian prison. He said he was photographed and that the same Australian official saw him being beaten. A report in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on Saturday named the official as Alistair Adams.

Held incommunicado in Egypt, Habib said he was tortured every day. This included electric shocks, water torture, beatings, drugs and being burnt with cigarettes. At one point he was stripped and told that a specially trained dog would rape him. Under these conditions, he said he agreed to everything his interrogators demanded, including telling them that he had trained the terrorists who attacked the World Trade Center, transported chemicals in Afghanistan, and been involved in combat in

Chechnya.

Habib told "Sixty Minutes" that he categorically rejected these so-called "confessions", explaining that he had been so terrified that he was prepared to admit anything. He also said he saw an Australian official in Egypt speaking about him to an American. After six months, Habib was transported to Afghanistan and then Guantánamo Bay. Egyptian interrogators, however, told him before he left that he was returning to Australia.

In Guantánamo, Habib said the US interrogators did everything possible "to make me crazy". Kept in isolation for lengthy periods, he was sexually humiliated by a prostitute, told that his family were dead and shown images of his wife's head superimposed on photographs of naked women next to Osama bin Laden.

At one point, Habib made a desperate pact with David Hicks, the other Australian citizen in Guantánamo. If Hicks returned to Australia and could not locate Habib, he should tell Habib's family that he had been killed.

Commenting on the psychological abuse, Habib said: "No-one should be treated in [the] way people are treated in Cuba. [T]he American [military] ... how they are treating people, they are terrorists, not the people like us. They have no humanity."

Habib denied unsubstantiated allegations now being circulated by the Howard government that he had attended two Al Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan and had advance knowledge of, and supported, the September 11 terrorist attacks on the US. He also rejected claims that he had called his wife to warn her about 9/11. Habib said his telephone had been bugged for two years before his seizure in Pakistan, and that even if he had known about the attack, would never have spoken about it on the phone.

In October 2001, the Howard government reacted to Habib's arrest in Pakistan by giving Washington the go-ahead to do what they liked. When he was eventually transferred to Guantánamo Bay, via Afghanistan's Bagram prison, senior government ministers endorsed this illegal action, denouncing Habib as a terrorist and a dangerous fugitive. Canberra responded to the mounting evidence that Habib and numerous other detainees were tortured in Afghanistan and Guantánamo with a series of evasions and outright lies. These are now starting to unravel.

Unable to repudiate Habib's testimony last Sunday, the government has responded with a smear campaign against the 50-year-old former cleaner. Senior government ministers, Australian intelligence officers and the corporate media have repeated ad nauseum that Habib is a "danger to society", "a liar", "untrustworthy" and worse. However, they have been unable to offer any explanation as to why he was released without charge by the US.

On Monday, Attorney General Ruddock told parliament he had not asked Washington why Habib had been repatriated, and he had no plans to do so. He ruled out any investigation into Habib's allegations and said

this was an issue for the US alone. Any attempt to go further would violate American sovereignty.

Ruddock, who still maintains that he has “no knowledge” about whether Habib was rendered to Egypt, told the ABC’s “7.30 Report” that Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) and Australian Federal Police (AFP) officers had questioned Habib in Pakistan. But no Australian official, he claimed, had ever witnessed or been involved in the interrogation or torture of prisoners.

Ruddock’s flimsy denials were shattered later that night when Rod Barton, a former high-level Australian weapons inspector, who worked with Hans Blix, UNSCOM, the CIA and British intelligence in Iraq, told the ABC’s “Four Corners” program that he and other Australian officials had been involved in the interrogation of Iraq detainees. The next day, Defence Minister Robert Hill desperately tried to dismiss Barton’s evidence by claiming that the weapons inspector had not been involved in interrogations but only “interviews”.

(Hill’s evasions follows revelations last year that senior government ministers were warned about the Abu Ghraib torture scandal in late 2003 and that Australian Army officers had visited the notorious prison and even given lectures on interrogation techniques to some of those involved. One Australian officer worked with American military authorities to help write a legal justification for violations of the Geneva Convention and deflect concerns raised by the Red Cross. [See: “Australian government lies exposed on Abu Ghraib torture”])

As more questions began to be raised about Habib’s torture, AFP commissioner Mick Keelty and ASIO chief Denis Richardson used a Senate Estimates Committee hearing on Tuesday to denounce the former detainee. While their testimony was aimed at deflecting attention from the government’s culpability, it provided even more evidence of the criminal violation of Habib’s rights.

Keelty claimed that Habib had received weapons training in Pakistan and visited Afghanistan as a “mercenary” for Osama bin Laden. Richardson claimed that the Australian citizen had been in Afghanistan with people “who had a history of murdering innocent civilians”. These accusations, which Habib had emphatically denied in the “Sixty Minutes” interview, were not sourced or substantiated.

Richardson and Keelty were both forced to admit that Habib had not committed any crime under Australian law at the time. And in their most damaging admissions, they revealed that their officers had willfully ignored Habib’s protests when they interrogated him in Pakistan and Guantánamo Bay.

Keelty said ASIO and AFP personnel rejected Habib’s allegations in Pakistan that he had been tortured, claiming that he was attempting to sidetrack accusations that he had been in Afghanistan. Richardson said: “We didn’t consider they [the torture allegations] needed to be considered, nor investigated. We considered they were humbug and we believe they’re humbug today.”

In other words, ASIO and AFP became the self-appointed judge and jury of an illegally detained Australian citizen, who had not been charged and who was denied any access to a lawyer or his family. The two organisations either turned a blind eye or directly collaborated in his rendition to Egypt.

In line with the Howard government’s current story, Richardson maintained that ASIO had not been told whether Habib had been sent to Egypt, but only “discovered” this in February 2002. Keelty also disclosed that the AFP did not conduct any investigation into whether Habib had been rendered to Egypt, despite his protests to AFP officers who interrogated him in Guantánamo Bay on May 15, 2002.

Even if one were to accept the claims by AFP, ASIO and the Howard government—Washington’s closest allies in the so-called “war on terror”—that they were not told that Habib was being sent to Egypt, they soon learnt and knew exactly what it meant. But instead of protesting this

crime, they responded with another blatant cover-up.

As last Sunday’s *New York Times* reported, in November 2001 Australia’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade sent Habib’s wife, Maha, a fax. It cynically declared: “We remain confident that your husband is detained in Egypt... the government has received credible advice that he is well and being treated well.”

What a damning exposure of the Howard government! So endemic are the legalistic evasions, double-talk and outright falsifications in the government’s daily operations that the liars can’t keep track of their lies. Ruddock still claims to “not know” whether Habib was imprisoned in Egypt, the official position of the government since October 2001; ASIO admits that it “discovered” he had been sent to Egypt in February 2002; and the Department of Foreign Affairs told Habib’s wife in November 2001 that he was in Egypt and “being treated well”.

As the government’s abuse of Habib’s basic democratic rights has become more and more apparent, the media, led by the Murdoch press, has ratcheted up its campaign against him.

Habib, who is attempting to recover from serious physical and psychological abuse, has been subjected to a vicious campaign in Murdoch’s *Daily Telegraph*, which has published editorials, comments and offensive cartoons designed to condition the population to accepting Habib’s treatment. This week the newspaper called for any payments made to Habib for the “Sixty Minutes” interview to be confiscated and demanded that he repay all previous disability pension allowances.

A key figure in this witch-hunt is New South Wales Labor Party state premier Bob Carr. On Tuesday Carr, who has pledged to maintain ongoing police surveillance of Habib, published a provocative comment in the *Telegraph* entitled, “It’s right to have real concerns”.

Carr carefully avoided any mention of the torture, abuse and other violations of Habib’s basic rights, and regurgitated the usual slurs. Habib had been under surveillance by ASIO before his arrest in Pakistan, he had been a radical Muslim, there were “well-founded suspicions”, etc., etc. As is now commonplace, the Labor leader provided no evidence and, like the federal government, did not explain why the US had been forced to release Habib without charge.

Likewise, the federal Labor Party has rejected an investigation into Habib’s treatment. Leader Kim Beazley has opposed calls for Habib to be compensated over his illegal detention and denounced him for accepting a paid interview with “Sixty Minutes”.

Most importantly, neither the Labor Party nor any of the official opposition parties have called for the prime minister, attorney general or any other senior minister in the Howard government to be indicted for war crimes. As Habib’s initial testimony makes clear, the Australian government and its security personnel have collaborated in the illegal detention, abuse and torture of an Australian citizen—crimes under the Geneva Convention and the Australian Criminal Code.

Since Habib’s return to Australia, his family home has been broken into twice. According to the family’s lawyer, Stephen Hopper, NSW police illegally revealed Habib’s address to the media after the first break-in. The second housebreak occurred a few hours after the “Sixty Minutes” interview was broadcast.

Last Thursday, Habib demanded his right to appear in parliament to refute the lies and slander against him. But Robert McClelland, Labor’s federal defence spokesman, quickly rejected his appeal. “The Senate shouldn’t be used as a court of law,” McClelland declared. “I would feel uncomfortable with that.”

Beazley echoed this today. “I’m not in the business of making this bloke a hero,” he told ABC Radio National. “He shouldn’t have opportunity to give evidence to a Senate committee and we shouldn’t waste a minute on him.”

As far as the Labor leadership is concerned, Howard government ministers and senior ASIO and AFP chiefs can use the Senate Estimates

committee and other parliamentary forums to hurl innuendo, half-truths and outright lies against Habib, but he has no right to confront and challenge his accusers.



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